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ABSTRACT

This study examined how parental practices in mainland China influence adolescents' school performance, including school motivation and grade point average (GPA), when moderated by self-esteem and self-efficacy. Participating in the study were 497 students, ranging in age from 12 to 19 years, attending six public junior and senior high schools. Subjects completed a questionnaire designed to assess adolescents' perception of parental support, reasoning, monitoring, punitiveness, and autonomy granting, as well as subjects' school motivation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and conformity to parents. The findings indicated that all five parental practices were significant predictors of at least one of the moderating variables: conformity to parents, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Parental support and monitoring were positive predictors of conformity, whereas parental reasoning and autonomy-granting were positive predictors of self-efficacy. Parental punitiveness and autonomy-granting predicted self-esteem. Both conformity to parents and self-efficacy had positive effects on school motivation, with self-efficacy also having a strong positive and direct influence on GPA. Self-esteem did not affect either motivation or GPA significantly. (Contains 32 references.) (KB)

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# Effect of Chinese Parental Practices on Their Adolescent Children's School Performance, Moderated by Student's Conformity to Parents, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy

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**Effect of Chinese Parental Practices on Their Adolescent Children's School Performance, Moderated by Student's Conformity to Parents, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy**

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Education has always been an important issue but in recent years has drawn much attention for reform at government, school, and family levels of our society. Part of this attention is derived from the fact that American students have not performed as well as students from other countries in the standardized tests such as mathematics. Some Asian countries, such as Japan are frequently identified as having more successful test scores. More noticeable is that countries or regions having large Chinese populations, such as Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, all demonstrate excellent academic achievement by the youth in these societies. In fact, Chinese Americans have better performances than other ethnic minority groups in the United States (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996). Researchers suggest that the explanations reside in certain unique Chinese cultural and child-rearing characteristics (Chao, 1994; Chao & Sue, 1996) such as the possibility that Chinese parents emphasize the importance of education more extensively than other racial and ethnic groups (Chao, 1996; Hau & Salili, 1996). The purpose of this paper is to examine how parental practices influence adolescents' school performance including school motivation and grade point average in Mainland China, when moderated by such variables as self-esteem and self-efficacy that are components of the self-concept. The findings in this study should offer insight into how Chinese parents function to affect children's success in schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

The criterion variable of interest for this study is school performance which is assessed by school motivation and grade point average (GPA). GPA is a straightforward index indicating how successful students are in school academic endeavors. As for school motivation, in this study, we focus on the academic goals that students wish to achieve, the academic activities in which they are interested, how they appraise the importance of education, and how they feel adjusted to school in general. Since "goals direct behavior toward outcomes that individuals would like to achieve" (Wentzel, 1998), we expect, therefore, to find a positive relationship between school motivation and GPA.

A review of variations in child-rearing by Maccoby and Martin (1983) indicates that parenting has been examined from different perspectives. Some researchers conceptualize child-rearing in terms of restrictiveness and permissiveness, whereas others use such constructs as demandingness and responsiveness. Baumrind, for example,

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finds that authoritative parents who use high degrees of both demandingness and responsiveness are most effective in fostering competent outcomes in most Anglo-European youth (1991). Although this finding is mostly true for Anglo-European samples and middle class (Grusec, 1997), different results are reported in other cultures for specific outcomes. For example, Asian high school students from more authoritarian families appear to achieve better grades, despite the fact that researchers have failed to connect parenting styles, specifically authoritative parenting, to children's school achievement for Chinese samples (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Leung, Lau & Lam, 1998). Other studies report the contrasting finding that authoritative parenting indeed has positive effect on the school performance of Chinese youth (Chen, Dong & Zhou, 1997). These contradictory conclusions might result from various methodological factors such as sample selection, instruments used, but we believe mainly that "any parenting typology captures a configuration of parenting practices, thus making it difficult to ascertain what aspect of parenting affects which development outcome (Darling & Steinberg, 1993)". Consequently, instead of looking at parenting styles, we choose more specific parenting practices or behaviors to examine and determine their influence on adolescent school achievement.

Individual components of parenting practices for this study are selected according to the following rationale (see Peterson & Hann, 1999). Parental support and control are two dimensions that predict a youngster's social competence. Support in general is considered a unique dimension that refers to warmth, verbal praise, and physical affection. Parental control, on the other hand, has been demonstrated to have both positive and negative dimensions. First, there is *firm control* on the positive side, which includes such behaviors as induction and monitoring. Parental induction implies that parents communicate expectations or rules to their children by means of reasoning. Parental monitoring refers to the degree to which parents are aware of their child's companions, physical whereabouts, activities, and so forth. The negative aspect of control is *excessive parental control*, with punitiveness being the most prominent strategy which is defined as a form that "consists of either verbal or physical attempts to apply control, without the benefit of rational explanations". Besides the two dimensions described above, another parental control dimension is autonomy-granting behavior, which indicates how much the young are allowed to make their own decisions in life.

In order to understand Chinese parent-child dynamics, it is important to look at broader cultural issues that shape patterns of socialization. The general cultural patterns of collectivism versus individualism are often used to compare the differences between Eastern and Western societies. Markus and Kitayama (1991), for example,

propose to distinguish these two perspectives by looking at how differently the self is conceived in each culture. From their point of views, in some Western cultures, such as the United States, the self as an independent entity, whereas in Eastern cultures such as Japan, the self is thought to be a product of being interdependent. Therefore, in American culture, "individuals seek to maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique inner attributes". In Japanese culture, on the other hand, "the emphasis is on attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them". Rephrased by Tafarodi and Swann (1996), a collectivist culture emphasizes social interdependence, connectedness, and mutual deference or compromise. Consequently, an individualistic society emphasizes the self, whereas a collectivistic society is concerned more with the well-being of others. The expectation, of course, is that the socialization process in various societies will reflect either a collectivistic or individualistic perspective. (cf. Fijneman, Willemsen, & Poortinga, 1996)

As some scholars propose, the People's Republic of China leans toward collectivism (Tafarodi et al., 1996) in which responsiveness to the interests of others is extremely important. Chinese parents tend to exercise control and to be restrictive (Lin & Fu, 1990; Chao & Sue, 1996). With the young being taught attitudes of obedience and consideration towards others, all of which are traits of a collectivistic society. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Chinese adolescents are found be more compliant than American youngsters (Zhang, & Thomas, 1994) since both family and society approve and encourage such collectivistic attitudes. "How is compliance to parents related to school performance?" is the next question. In fact, because of the importance placed on education by Chinese parents and society, as earlier mentioned, conforming to parents' wishes probably insinuates that youngsters will identify with their parents, recognize the importance of education, and eventually work hard to achieve academic goals. Consequently, higher conformity to parents should be a positive predictor of school achievement among Chinese adolescents.

Both self-esteem and self-efficacy, on the other hand, incline more to the individualism. Self-esteem is concerned with "the affect or feelings the individual has about his or her overall worth or specific attributes" (Suls, 1989, p.147). It has been found to be effective in predicting virtually every aspect of success or competence in Western cultures. For example, Klein concludes that self-esteem connects to long-term mental health, and to emotional well-being (1995); Barber et al point out its relationship to the social interaction of individuals (1992) and its role as a critical characteristic or major step toward independence. Bartle, Anderson and Sabatelli (1989)

uncover its close relation to individuation process. Closed related is the idea that "perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1995, p.2). Schunk (1984) concludes that self-efficacy positively relates to task motivation and learning. Other studies also reveal that self-efficacy leads to higher aspiration, less fear of failure, and greater persistence when engaging in difficult tasks. (Oettingen, 1995; Bandura, 1989) While higher self-esteem and efficacy should be beneficial to school motivation and academic performance, their positive effects on Chinese adolescents might not be as powerful. That is, if Chinese culture is collectivistic in nature, the forces of individualism (i.e., self-esteem and self-efficacy) might have diminished influence in Chinese socialization process.

The following highlights from previous research intend to provide a simple framework for the current study. First of all, concerning parental support and control, some longitudinal studies illustrate that parental support positively influences children's self-esteem and self-efficacy (cf. Van Aken, & Riksen-Walraven, 1992; Felson, & Zielinski, 1989). Peterson, Rollins, & Thomas (1985), for example, report that parental support positively influences compliance but not internalization, whereas parental reasoning positively influences both compliance and internalization. Another investigation by Barber, Chadwick, & Oerter(1992) involving parental practices finds that parental support significantly influences the self-esteem of girls and boys, whereas parental reasoning significantly influences the self-esteem of girls (Barber et al., 1992). Moreover, lower degrees of parental monitoring results in higher degrees of problem behaviors such as drinking and drug use. (Barnes, & Farrell, 1992). Parental punitiveness, however, is found to be a positive predictor of external compliance (Peterson et al., 1985). Finally, although Bulcroft, Carmody, and Bulcroft (1996) find that older children and Anglo adolescents receive more independence granted by parents, Lin and Fu (1990) conclude, nevertheless, that Chinese parents encourage more independence than do Caucasian parents.

As mentioned earlier, although some cross-cultural studies indicate that high control and monitoring are predictors of students' school performance, the effectiveness of authoritarian parenting has been questioned, and many researchers have found that authoritative parenting is more efficient for school performance (Steinberg, Lamborn,, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987). These divergent results remind us of the importance of considering cultural differences and different conceptualizations of parenting styles. The mediator variables in this study, conformity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, are chosen to examine the issue of cultural differences in terms of collectivistic versus individualistic orientations. If Chinese culture is indeed

collectivistic, conformity will be an important predictor and mediator of school achievement, whereas self-esteem and efficacy are important characteristics of individualistic societies that predict better school performance. Consequently, we expect conformity to parents to be a stronger predictor and mediator of influence than either self-esteem or self-efficacy in a sample of Chinese adolescents.

To summarize, Figure 1 depicts the basic research model of this study. We suggest that parental practices influence the adolescent's conformity and self variables and, in turn, affect school performance. A more specific model is delineated in Figure 2. This research applies five individual components of parenting practices as predictor or exogenous variables, which are (1) parental support, (2) parental reasoning, (3) parental monitoring, (4) parental punitiveness, and (5) autonomy granted by parents. The mediator variable, self-concept and behavior, is consist of adolescent self-esteem , self-efficacy, and conformity to parents,. Finally, school motivation and GPA measure school performance as the criterion variable. These variables are identified to answer the three major research questions in this study: (1) how do different parental practices influence adolescent's compliance, self-esteem and self-efficacy? (2) what are the relations among the mediating variables: conformity, self-esteem and self-efficacy? (3) how do these moderating variables affect adolescent school performance?

**Method**

Data collection

Data were collected from People's Republic of China in 1994. The sample was taken from six public schools in Beijing with 497 students who attended junior and senior high schools being included in the survey. Their ages range from 12 to 19 with about even numbers of male (241) and female (242) participants being assessed. The Chinese version of the questionnaires was administered to students with the assistance from teachers who had received special training for this survey. A brief introduction of procedure was given to students before they completed the questionnaires in the classroom. A debriefing to explain the purpose of the project immediately followed the completion of the surveys in order to avoid any stereotypes or bias accompanying this survey. Six hundred questionnaires were distributed originally and 497of them were valid and included in this study.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire consists of items that assess parent-adolescent relationship and adolescent outcome variables. Only some of the variables assessed are included in this study. The original survey instrument was developed in English. For this particular survey, the instrument was first translated into Chinese, and then back

translated to English to prevent the distortion of questions over translation. Items from these scales had been factor analyzed to choose items with factor loadings of .50 and higher. The variables used in this study were measured by scales of items that assessed adolescents' perceptions of parental support, reason, monitoring, and punitiveness. Responses to these items were 5 point Likert scales (never - always). Other variables examined in this study were adolescents' perceptions of autonomy granted by parents, their conformity to parents, their self-esteem and self-efficacy and finally, the school motivation. Items that composed these variables were 4-point Likert scales (strongly agree - strongly disagree). Finally, grade point average was measured by a 5-point scale since in China the GPA was calculated from higher than 90, 80-89, 70-79, 60-69 and below 60. Reliabilities of these variables range from .68 (school motivation) to .93 (parental punitiveness).

**Result**

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the variables included in this study. Among all parental practice variables, punitiveness has the lowest means. The rest of the parental practice variables have similar means. Notice that autonomy granted by parent does not have the same scale as other four parental practices, therefore, we cannot conclude that this variable obtained the highest score.

The correlation matrix is shown in Table 2. Our focus is on the relationships among conformity, esteem and efficacy. As expected, self-esteem and efficacy have a significant positive correlation ($r = .264$). However, conformity has a negative correlation with efficacy of -.079, and a positive correlation with self-esteem ($r = .059$), but both of those were nonsignificant.

Path analysis using LISREL VIII statistical package was employed to examine the relationships among the variables. Five exogenous variables were included: parental support, parental reasoning, parental punitiveness, parental monitoring, and autonomy granted by parent. The mediator variables were adolescent's conformity to parents, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Target endogenous variables were school motivation and GPA. The following results were obtained:

First, the best predictors for conformity were parental support and monitoring with standardized coefficients equaling .18 ($p < .01$) for both variables. Parental punitiveness demonstrated a significant negative effect, whereas autonomy-granting ($\beta = -.17$, $p<.01$) demonstrated a significant positive effect on self-esteem ($\beta=.14$, $p<.01$). Autonomy granted by parents is the strongest predictor of self-efficacy with the standardized coefficient of

.27, p<.001, while parental reasoning also was a significant predictor of efficacy at the p <.05 level (standardized coefficient = .12).

As for the target endogenous variables in this study, school motivation was predicted in a positive manner by conformity to parents and self-efficacy. Both significance levels for these predictors were beyond .001 level (standardized β's were .17 & .22 respectively). On the other hand, GPA was also significantly predicted by self-efficacy at a slightly higher level of p < .05 (β=.11). The best predictor of GPA, however, was the school motivation, which was significant at p <.001 level with a standardized coefficient of .20. Although the goodness of fit index demonstrated a reasonable fit for this model with Chi-square of 14.56, degrees of freedom=12, the path equations did not predict the endogenous variables very well. The $R^2$ for conformity to parent, self-esteem, self-efficacy, school motivation, and GPA were .11, .062, .11, .094, and .068 respectively. In other words, the variables conformity to parents and self-efficacy only had 11 percent of their variances explained and both final target variables had less than 10 percent explained. This result is not surprising because a lot of other factors having impact on school motivation and GPA were not included in this study.

Figure 3 shows the paths that were found to be significant in the analysis. Although parental support has been found to influence many aspects of child development, this variable only attains significance within this sample as a positive predictor of conformity to parents expectations. Another parental practice has significant effect on conformity is parental monitoring. Self-esteem has two significant predictors with punitiveness being a negative predictor and autonomy-granting behaviors by parents being a positive predictor. Self-efficacy, in turn, was predicted by parental reasoning and autonomy-granted by parents both of which were in positive directions. As to mediating effects, conformity to parents and self-efficacy have significant positive effects on school motivation, which, in turn, was a strong positive predictor of GPA. Self-efficacy, not only predicted school motivation, but also had a direct, positive effect on GPA. A notable result was that self-esteem did not affect either motivation or GPA significantly in our study.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In summary, all five parental practices were significant predictors of at least one of the moderating variables, conformity to parents, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Parental support and monitoring were significant positive predictors of adolescent conformity, whereas parental reasoning and autonomy granting were positive predictors of self-efficacy. Parental punitiveness and autonomy granting by parents predicted self-esteem with

respective negative and positive coefficients. Both conformity to parents and self-efficacy have positive effects on school motivation, with self-efficacy also having a strong positive influence on GPA directly. Surprisingly, self-esteem is irrelevant to both school motivation and GPA. These results suggest several conclusions as follows:

Generally, parental behaviors have a positive influence on adolescents' conformity to parents, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. The only exception was parental punitive behaviors, which functions to decrease the degree of youthful self-esteem. Such results indicate that Mainland Chinese parents influence their adolescents' self-concepts in much the same way as Western parents. The difference occurs, however, when we examine at how adolescents' compliance to parents and dimensions of self-concepts affect their school performance. The fact that conformity significantly influences school motivation not only verifies the importance of conformity in Chinese society but also suggest that collectivistic norms are integral to the parent-youth socialization process. The finding that self-esteem does not affect either motivation or GPA actually provides more evidence for rejecting individualism as governing principle. It is interesting, in turn, that self-efficacy is a significant predictor of both school motivation and GPA with larger coefficients than those for conformity. These findings raise the issue as to whether self-efficacy is indeed an individualistic attribute, or, in fact, may have linkages to collectivistic orientations. Bandura (1995), for example, questions the close connection between individualism and self-efficacy described by some writers. He argues that personal efficacy is valued, not because of its origins in individualism, but "because a strong sense of personal efficacy is vital for successful adaptation and change regardless of whether it is achieved individually or by group members working together". Bandura proposes, therefore, that "group achievements and social change are rooted in self-efficacy" (p.34) with the implication being that high self-efficacy can be emphasized and achieved in a collectivistic society.

Some limitations in this study should be mentioned. First, all the variables were measured from adolescent's perspective, which includes parental practices. As some studies point out, parents and children often report somewhat differently about parental behaviors, with the result being that, we should be cautious about the possibility that these results will hold for only one perception.

Secondly, our study concludes that parental support and firm control have positive influence on Chinese adolescents' self-concepts including self-esteem and efficacy. However, some research has indicated that, instead of unidirectional influences, reciprocal influences are likely to occur between parental behaviors and adolescent self-concepts. For example, according to Schunk (1989), it is true that self-efficacy increases school motivation, but also

that school success is likely to promote self-efficacy. Longitudinal studies also have shown a reciprocal relationship between parental support and both self-esteem and competence by the young (Van Aken, & Riksen-Walraven, 1992; Felson, & Zielinski, 1989). Notice that in this cross-sectional study, we cannot presume that causal relationships exist between the variables we examined.

Finally, it is important to point out that fathers and mothers often have distinctive parenting styles and may influence children in different ways. In addition, daughters and sons are sometimes treated differently by parents. For example, Felson and Zielinski. (1989) conclude that parents have a greater effect on the self-esteem of girls than of boys. In a study that compares perceptions of parenting in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the authors report that mothers were perceived as warmer and less controlling than fathers, but that daughters perceived their fathers as warmer and as less controlling than did sons (Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Hau, & Lew, 1993). Shek (1995) also confirms that across socioeconomic classes, parental and maternal parenting styles are perceived differently by Chinese adolescents. Although Strom, Strom, and Xie's investigation indicated that parents of sons report more difficulties and frustrations than parents of daughters (1996), these gender interaction effects are not examined in this study.

Based upon the limitations illustrated, future studies should examine more specific paternal and maternal effects on daughters and sons respectively. Moreover, in order to get more accurate parental practice measures, direct reports of those behaviors from parents themselves may be important. Moreover, reciprocal relationships between parenting and child outcomes are increasingly plausible in the literature. Although it is difficult to empirically examine this kind of relationship, longitudinal designs are the most credible approach, but will require lengthy periods of time and effort. In sum, careful studies should be conducted to find out more about the similar and unique ways Chinese parents influence various psychosocial outcomes of Chinese children and youth.

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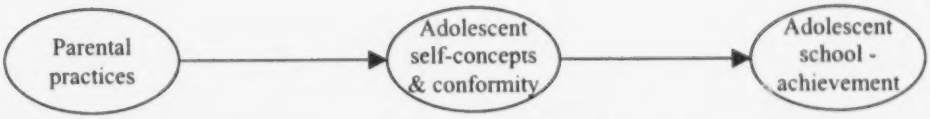


Figure 1. Basic Path Model

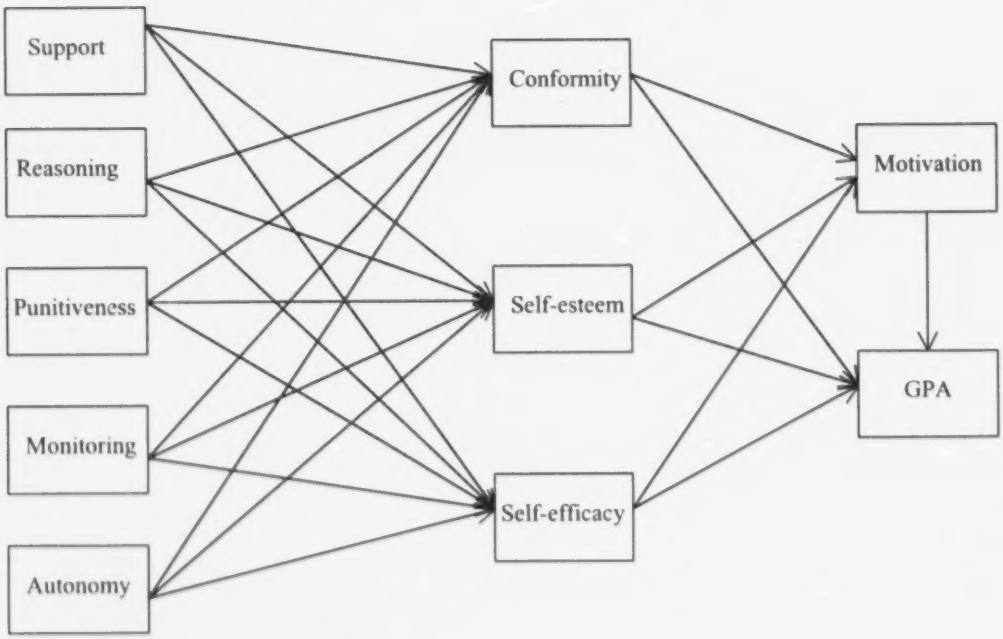


Figure 2. Original Path Model of Parental Practice Effects on School Performances

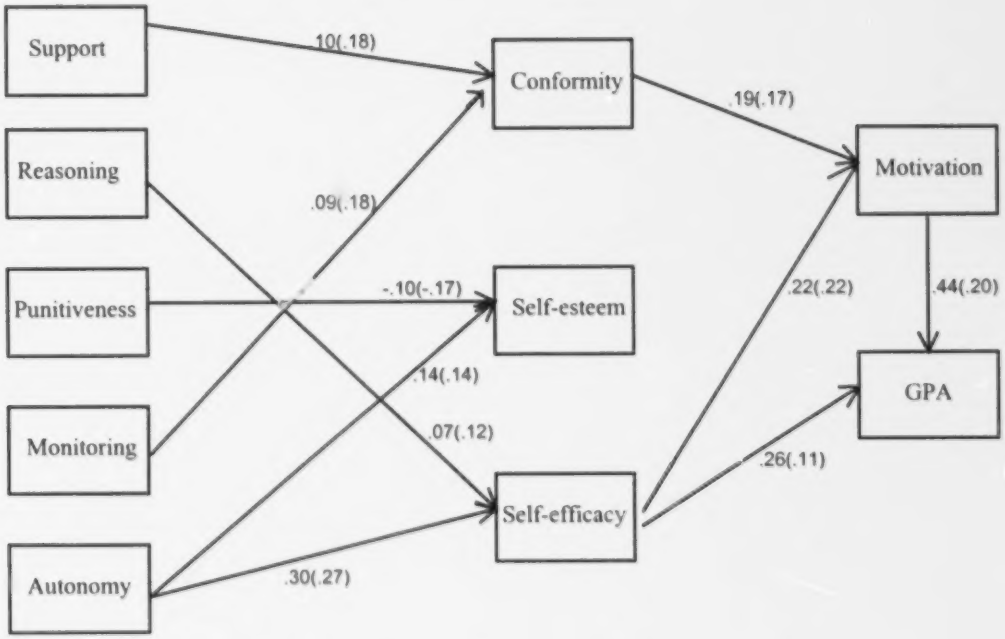


Figure 3. Final Path Model

*** With Unstandardized coefficients**
**(standardized coefficients)**

**14** A

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations

| | Parental Practices | | | | | Moderators | | | School Performance | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variables | Autonomy | Support | Reasoning | Punitiveness | Monitor | Conformity | Self-Esteem | Self-Efficacy | Motivation | GPA |
| Mean | 2.9419 | 2.9082 | 2.8879 | 1.8198 | 2.8498 | 2.3271 | 2.9739 | 2.7027 | 2.9109 | 3.22 |
| SD | .4533 | .7796 | .8506 | .7878 | .8941 | .4436 | .4970 | .4363 | .5060 | 1.03 |
| N | 457 | 475 | 472 | 467 | 460 | 466 | 490 | 459 | 469 | 476 |

Table 2: Correlation[a] Matrix

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AUTONOMY | 1 | 1.000 | | | | | | | | | |
| SUPPORT | 2 | .323** | 1.000 | | | | | | | | |
| REASONING | 3 | .168** | .499** | 1.000 | | | | | | | |
| PUNITIVENESS | 4 | -.240** | -.182** | .092 | 1.000 | | | | | | |
| MONITORING | 5 | .085 | .266** | .215** | -.031 | 1.000 | | | | | |
| CONFORMITY | 6 | .099 | .269** | .200** | -.039 | .245** | 1.000 | | | | |
| SELF-EFFICACY | 7 | .187** | .090 | .058 | -.193** | -.005 | -.079 | 1.000 | | | |
| SELF-ESTEEM | 8 | .298** | .162** | .183** | -.062 | .130* | .059 | .264** | 1.000 | | |
| MOTIVATION | 9 | .134** | .111* | .091 | -.076 | .119* | .180** | .103* | .248** | 1.000 | |
| GPA | 10 | .125* | .097 | .040 | .075 | .078 | .119* | .075 | .203** | .284** | 1.000 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

a Listwise N=378